

Online, Open, and Equitable Education

Lessons from Teaching and Learning
during the Global Pandemic

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CHAPTER 8

Online Learning, Open Education, and Equity in the Age of COVID-19

Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education
through Blended Learning

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Higher education is experiencing a pedagogical revolution that has the potential to profoundly transform policy, practice, and research in a positive way, or negate the limited progress that has been made in the past thirty years toward learner-centered approaches to teaching and learning. In the spring of 2020, education at all levels entered what was thought to be a temporary period of remote emergency teaching caused by the onset of COVID-19. All educators were forced into online teaching, an approach that most were unfamiliar with. The spring 2020 semester grew into another full academic year of teaching and learning online. Spurred on by necessity and curiosity, interest in online and blended learning pedagogies burgeoned.

The basic premise of this chapter is that current interest in blended learning provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity for colleges and universities to support and collaborate with faculty who wish to transition to a blended learning modality which requires learner-centered teaching, the cornerstone of educational change (Weimer 2002). While emanating from advances in cognitive psychology (Bransford and Brown 2001; Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989; Ambrose et al. 2010), the role of assessment in learning (Shepard 2000; Huba and Freed 2000; Whitfield and Hartley 2019; McArthur 2016), and information and communication technologies

(Bates 2015; Hiltz and Turoff 2005; Williamson Shaffer, Nash, and Ruis 2015), the imperative for educational change has been propelled forward by the onset of COVID-19.

The Promise of Higher Education

The promises of higher education to society, in general, and to the students who enter their programs of study are embodied in learner-centered teaching. Higher education institutions promise to provide life-enriching learning experiences that prepare students to succeed academically and professionally as they become well-rounded, responsible, and informed citizens of the world. Mission statements speak of valuing creativity, critical thinking, and self-directed, independent, lifelong learning. Today twenty-first century essential dispositions are added to the promised list: flexibility, leadership, initiative, productivity, and the ability to collaborate with their peers (Urbani et al. 2017).

The promise of higher education rests upon how these intellectual skills, abilities, and dispositions will be learned. We promise learner-centered institutions with classrooms which foster partnerships between the students and the teacher, between the students and each other, and between the students and the subject under study. We promise timely formative feedback which will prepare them to complete complex, performance-based, and authentic assessments that are directly linked with the goals of instruction. We promise that they will learn actively, complete meaningful learning tasks, be evaluated on authentic assessment tasks that are valid, reliable, transparent, and fair, while constantly receiving faculty and institutional support. All institutions of higher education promise that students will experience meaningful learning (Fink 2013).

Higher education assumes the role of creating capable, thoughtful graduates (Reimers and Steinbach 2016), and studies show that a college education can and does make a difference for most students (Bateman 1990; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). However, in the latter part of the twentieth century, frustration with the abilities and skills exhibited by college and university graduates emerged in

Canada and the United States. A new approach to supporting faculty in their role as teachers, in addition to their role as subject-matter experts, prompted a rethinking of learning and teaching in higher education. An emphasis was placed on identifying and measuring the achievement of specific learning outcomes, establishing accountability processes and the benefits of institutional assessment (Mentkowski et al. 2000). A paradigm shift away from a focus on providing instruction to a focus on learner-centered teaching began (Barr and Tagg 1995). This launched twenty-five years of research on teaching and learning in higher education that has primarily reached some policy makers, some interested faculty, and educational developers. Teaching centers, graduate programs in education, and professional organizations focusing on higher education blossomed, but all faced the challenge of coaxing faculty to enter the pedagogical world and reflect on their educational practice (Christensen Hughes and Mighty 2010; Matthews 2019; Carbone et al. 2019; Lakhali, Bateman, and Bédard 2017).

The results of research on teaching and learning in higher education are clear. How the educator teaches and assesses student learning directly influences how students approach their learning and whether they choose to adopt a deep or surface approach to their studies (Ramsden 2003; Prosser and Trigwell 2017). In addition, approaches to learning are dynamic and context-specific, and can thus vary from one learning activity or learning situation to another. There seems to be a general consensus that fundamentally sound teaching practices are based on constructive alignment, which refers to teaching where the learning objectives are appropriate and clear to the students, and the teaching methods and assessment tasks support student engagement in learning activities, the completion of which result in the achievement of the desired skills and understandings (Biggs 1996).

The onset of COVID-19 and the accompanying demand for remote emergency teaching brought with it a plethora of challenges, unexpected benefits, and a new era of experimentation, reflection, and questioning. Educators around the globe experimented with

narrated PowerPoints, video conferencing, online quizzes, Google Docs, software programs, forums, discussion groups, and learning management system features previously ignored (Stanistreet 2021). Assessments became online quizzes, take-home exams, and problem based. Some teachers were able to create communities of learners who worked together on projects and assignments, but many found themselves teaching to black boxes on a screen and wondering what happened to that teacher-student partnership. From a pedagogical perspective it forced many educators to consider their role in getting students engaged with the subject matter and assuming responsibility for their own learning. Most importantly, it exposed the complexities of the teaching and learning dynamic and revealed that there is an absolute need for students to be engaged in a meaningful way with their peers and the course material, whether they are in a face-to-face or online class. As a result, many colleges and universities are now tentatively examining ways to implement alternative delivery methods. The benefits of blended learning, which maintains face-to-face contact with students while integrating online approaches and technologies, has continued to emerge as an effective instructional model (Allen and Seaman 2016; “Report on Blended Learning HRSDC Canada” 2011; Dziuban et al. 2018).

Nearly all colleges and universities surveyed in 2018 by the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association, representing 92% of all Canadian postsecondary students, stated that blended learning was equal to or superior to face-to-face teaching (Canadian Digital Learning Research Association 2018). In 2003, the American Society for Training and Development identified blended learning as among the top ten trends to emerge in the knowledge delivery industry (Rooney 2003). A blended approach to learning combines online and face-to-face instruction and has been posited as being more effective than strictly face-to-face or strictly online approaches (“Innovative Practices Research Project” 2013).

What constitutes blended learning is not agreed upon, but in many higher education institutions there are overlapping practices which are interchangeably referred to as hybrid or blended.

However, there is a consensus that for both hybrid and blended there is an integration of online and face-to-face learning, and includes multi-modalities, flexibility, and student choice (Johnson 2021). It has been described as a dynamic and fast-changing phenomenon, with the terminology often struggling to keep up with the reality of what's happening (Prinsloo 2017).

Blended learning is sometimes perceived as an add-on to regular classroom instruction, or, as seen during the pandemic when faculty were thrown into the online world, an effort to simply find the right mix of asynchronous vs. synchronous sessions while adding a few technologies. This is a serious misconception. The social constructivist view of learning, in which blended learning is situated, posits that knowledge is not transferred from the teacher to the student; rather the teacher's role is to design learning activities which prompt the learner, through interaction with the material and their peers, to construct their own understandings (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). In addition, it is virtually impossible today not to use some form of IT in the delivery of courses. However, the use of basic IT does not constitute a blended learning approach; it simply signifies that technology is "blended" into the teaching of the course, as in the case where technology either enables or enhances learning (Graham, Woodfield, and Buckley 2013). An effective blended learning course does not happen by accident (Baran, Correla, and Thompson 2013; Garrison 2017). Current literature emphasizes the necessity of providing faculty support that "guides staff in innovative, interactive approaches to course design" (Salter 2006, 717). In the absence of such intervention, technological tools do little more than "replicate existing practice in an online environment" (Salter 2006, 717). Teachers trying to make this transition are constantly confronted by tensions and challenges that make them rethink their expectations and recraft their teaching strategies. To be transformative, blended learning requires "rethinking and redesigning the teaching and learning relationship" (Garrison and Kanuka 2004), which forces a re-evaluation of the way courses are developed, designed, and delivered in

higher education. The flexibility it affords, along with its emphasis on student engagement, collaboration, and discourse, makes blended learning an imperative.

Quebec Context

The challenges and issues surrounding blended learning are relevant to the CEGEP system in Quebec. Postsecondary education in Quebec is designed to provide a route to higher education to students who would otherwise not have access. The promise is a society composed of active, thoughtful citizens who can read, write, and think. These publicly funded colleges are called CEGEPs, an acronym for “collège d’enseignement général et professionnel” and in Quebec, Canada, it is a public educational institution where the first level of higher education is provided in both of the province’s official languages—French and English. This unique step in Quebec’s educational ladder offers students two years in their chosen discipline, before moving on to university where they spend three years completing their undergraduate degree.

One College’s Journey

Champlain College Saint-Lambert (CCSL) is an Anglophone college located on the South Shore of Montreal, with approximately 3,100 students and 252 daytime faculty offering pre-university programs in liberal arts, science, social science, and arts, communication, and literature, and career programs in nursing, business management, tourism, and computer science. At CCSL, blended learning is understood as courses that integrate traditional face-to-face class activities with structured, asynchronous learning activities that are completed outside of the classroom. An institutionally defined portion of face-to-face time is replaced by these learning activities, which are overseen, supported, and reinforced by the teacher (Picciano 2009). Teachers of first-semester students are allowed to reduce seat-time in their courses by 20%; teachers of subsequent courses can reduce seat-time up to 50%. Arriving at this definition, which appears to be straightforward and simple, has been a process

of ongoing adaptation requiring the collaboration of the faculty and administration.

The work of Graham, Woodfield, and Buckley (2013) establishes a framework for institutional adoption of blended learning which has three interconnected stages or levels: awareness/exploration, adoption/early implementation, and mature/implementation. Within each stage of adoption, they examine institutional strategies, structures, and supports that are used to move an institution toward the integration and adoption of blended learning. This framework is used to describe the evolution of blended learning at CCSL.

Stage 1: Awareness/Exploration

In this first stage there is no official institutional strategy, but an awareness of increased interest in blended learning with limited support for individual faculty. In the spring of 2019, Champlain College Saint-Lambert was in the awareness/exploration stage of moving faculty towards using a blended learning approach to deliver instruction. At this time, faculty were encouraged to register for a three-credit graduate course on blended learning offered by the University of Sherbrooke as part of their Performa Program designed to support CEGEP teachers (Bateman et al. 2016). The course focuses on course redesign and utilizes the Community of Inquiry and the Practical Inquiry Model as its instructional framework (Garrison 2017). At the same time, a task force, consisting of six faculty members and two administrators began discussing areas of concern such as class size, intellectual property, teacher substitution, technical support, and developing expertise on campus. There was also an underlying faculty suspicion that the provincial government viewed blended learning as an opportunity to impose online teaching. These discussions culminated in the creation of the first blended learning agreement between the administration and the faculty, which provided an initial definition of blended learning and outlined operating parameters.

In the winter of 2020, seven teachers were given permission to pilot a blended learning course. When COVID-19 struck, colleges

came to a temporary halt. When the reopening of schools shifted to a uniquely online platform, while most teachers entered a period of emergency remote teaching and scrambled to survive, these teachers and their students transitioned seamlessly to online teaching and learning, a transition which they credited to a “blended learning mindset” and the Community of Inquiry instructional framework they had used to design their courses (Garrison and Vaughan 2008; Garrison 2017). In March 2020, the aforementioned course on blended learning was offered to faculty at Anglophone colleges in Quebec but had to be cancelled due to insufficient enrollment. It was re-advertised during the COVID-19 lockdown and ultimately ran, requiring two sections to accommodate its forty participants. Eleven teachers from CCSL were among the forty.

Stage 2: Adoption/Early Implementation

The early implementation stage of an institution’s adoption of blended learning is marked by an increased awareness that something is happening; that life as we know it is changing; and in this case, that education is changing. The educational institution begins to provide resources, and the number of people advocating for the change increases. This stage, which CCSL still resides in, spanned the entire 2020–2021 academic year and is still ongoing. However, at that time, a small advocacy group, consisting of four faculty members who had expertise in blended learning, was given release time to begin introducing blended learning as a viable and preferable way of delivering instruction. They were christened the Blended Learning Transformational Lead Team (BLTLT). Given the limited pedagogical support offered by the college at that time and the fact that the entire faculty had to teach completely online, their efforts focused on survival strategies for teaching online during a pandemic. As almost no one was permitted on campus, authentic blended learning was a moot point. However, interested teachers continued to prepare to teach using a blended learning modality by registering and taking the course on blended learning.

As the academic year neared a close, the original task force reconvened to make plans and update guidelines for the fall of 2021. It was clear that colleges were returning to face-to-face instruction. The teachers who had studied blended learning might now be given the opportunity to apply it, but once again, policy, planning, resources, scheduling, and support needed to be considered (Garrison and Kanuka 2004; Garrison and Vaughan 2008). After intense dialog among members of the committee and the administration, it was agreed that teachers who had received training in the theoretical underpinnings and application of blended learning models could offer their courses using a blended learning format in the fall 2021 semester. This prompted an additional twenty-five teachers to take the blended learning course during the summer of 2021.

The fall 2021 semester was mixed with trials and tribulations. Advocacy increased when the four-member BLTLT was increased to twelve, and forty teachers began to apply blended learning principles, instructional strategies, and intense course design processes to their fall 2021 courses. While interest increased, a contrasting sentiment began to emerge. Driven by a misconception about what blended learning entails, some faculty members came to view those who were teaching their courses in a blended learning format as a group of teachers receiving special privileges. Issues of faculty fairness and access entered the conversation. A reconstituted task force was created and a conversation regarding the role of and opportunities for professional development continued.

Stage 3: Moving Toward an Institutional Understanding of Blended Learning

Stage 3 is described as having well-established blended learning strategies and support that are integral to the institution's operations. The rapid growth in blended learning implementation and research has focused on course-level issues as opposed to institutional policy and addressing adoption challenges. This is an essential stage if the transformative effect of blended learning is to be realized (Garrison and Kanuka 2004). The focus is now expanding to include the

college's administration and faculty leaders as they move forward to strategically adopt and implement blended learning in their college classrooms. Negotiations are currently underway with our college's teachers' union, the Champlain College Teachers Association, and the administration to devise a local college policy which defines how blended learning is understood and the parameters for its implementation. For blended learning to be accepted it must also be addressed in the institution's policy on student evaluation and learning. Through its integration into policy, it moves from individual effort to a collective awareness, whether it is adopted by many or few teachers across the college.

Teacher Voices

In the fall 2021 semester, forty teachers were offering their courses using a blended learning modality. Twelve of these teachers, representing English, humanities, psychology, biology, history, creative arts, and nursing participated in this part of our study. The following thematic analysis is based on the data collected through semi-structured interviews conducted on Zoom and in-person, as well as reflections received through email responding to questions and prompts.

Teachers' Professional Growth

Pedagogical themes related to student learning that emerged from the interviews focused on the complexities of course design, establishing learning communities within the course, and moving students towards independent learning. Most faculty who participated in the course on blended learning reported that when they registered they did not understand what would be involved. They "knew education was changing" and were searching for support and strategies to cope with these new demands. Most arrived with an assumption that the course would focus on integrating technology into their teaching. The course's focus on course design and its subsequent impact on many participants supports the premise of the literature on blended learning, which argues that blended learning requires

a fundamental course redesign that transforms the course structure and approach to student learning (Garrison and Vaughan 2008).

My understanding of blended learning changed entirely. I initially thought it was just a question of reducing F2F contact hours initially and didn't really think it was all related to a very intentional course design. Initially, I thought that if I met with students once per week and gave them asynchronous tasks to replace the missed contact hours, that would mean that what I was doing was blended learning. How very wrong I was! (English).

I had never planned my course before being conscious of the cognitive, teaching, and social presences. This along with the questioning steps in the Practical Inquiry Model made a big difference in the quality of the student interactions and in their discussions. (Psychology)

The creation of a community of learners that functions in small learning teams in and outside the classroom is a hallmark of the transformative blended learning model CCSL is following. Science and nursing teachers utilized a team-based approach in their labs and clinical classes. These carefully planned asynchronous learning activities, completed outside of class, individually and in learning teams, were viewed as a powerful link between face-to-face meetings that deepened students' understanding of the course content and provided an opportunity for students to learn how to collaborate and engage in the inquiry process in an authentic way. The teacher's role is to guide the group so that over time group members become drivers of their own learning (Chance 2014). The result is a movement toward independent learning and increased comfort with the inquiry process, a process that might not reveal an answer. This was deemed an important component particularly in content-driven disciplines where students are used to memorizing and seeking correct answers.

Asynchronous work remains highly useful in lieu of class time to deepen understanding and build collaboration. Establishing community is an element of my teaching that is here for good, as it was before the pandemic, but now with even more confidence that learning happens in a community, not just the classroom. (Humanities)

We reduced the number of labs and replaced them with team-based projects. The procedural knowledge learned in a typical lab was replaced with collaborative learning activities that required an inquiry approach and resulted in deeper learning of the content along with a willingness and ability to work together. It increased student motivation. (Biology)

While working in learning teams was valued, challenges emerged. Working collaboratively did not come naturally. Students need to be taught how to be in a learning team, and they need to be held accountable for their work and contribution to the team. The goals of a college are similar to the goals of a university, but they are not the same, nor are the teaching and learning environments.

Our students take eight courses, and most courses meet twice a week. These constraints influence the making of the learning groups and maintaining their stability. And then there is their maturity level. They are young adults with different levels of maturity. Apart from their courses, many work outside of class, and have different levels of commitment to their learning. Blended learning helps these students, but it is not easy to establish them in a learning group, and sometimes we shift them round to get the right dynamic. Once they get feedback and realize that they have the power to change their work—it gives them confidence to engage. (Art History)

For the first time in my twelve-year teaching career, I never doubted whether my students had read the stories we were discussing. They all had. The asynchronous tasks I had planned needed to be submitted before our class, so I could see who had done them and who hadn't. It enabled me to follow up with students and communicate my openness in helping them if ever they were struggling. I also checked their homework and offered informal feedback via MIO [the LMS] or in person, and hope this made them feel like these tasks were useful. (English)

Transitioning between Face-to-Face, Online, and Blended Learning Modalities

Many teachers credited their “blended learning mindset” for their smooth transition to online teaching at the onset of COVID-19, then back to authentic blended learning teaching in the fall 2021 semester. However, as the term progressed it was important for them to find their own professional voice and place of comfort with how the educational experiences they had designed progressed.

During the winter 2020 lockdown, I was slowly transitioning/adapting my courses to blended learning during that semester, but when the lockdown occurred, the sudden adjustments prevented me from doing anything that had any real pedagogical purpose. From fall 2020–winter 2021 required distance teaching. This is when I was able to do blended learning correctly. I had spent the summer creating course designs based first on objectives/competencies, then assessments, then content. By redesigning my courses and knowing that distance teaching would/could involve asynchronous learning activities, I created Moodle activities focused on learning tasks, some to be done individually and others in teams. Individual work usually preceded

teamwork; but since most tasks were work-in-progress, formative in nature, and building up to the final project/essay to be done in my different courses, teamwork was usually designed to help with individual work in the end. So yes, the pandemic helped me apply blended learning, since students were already adapting/adapted to online work. Remote Zoom synchronous classes replaced what would have been face-to-face classes in my blended learning plan. Breakout rooms worked wonderfully, I was always able to offer teacher presence, and I feel that we were able to create a community of inquiry. I did not have any major technical challenges, nor did the students. All went well. (History)

Because of blended learning's emphasis on engagement, I refrained from ever lecturing and instead opted for a flipped classroom model. This technique often felt unnatural in the sense that I had no guarantee that students were reading and truly understanding the material, except for the homework they completed, which, realistically, I couldn't all read. Perhaps next time, I'll allow myself a few more moments of lecturing to ensure that course materials are clear for students. (English)

Changing the Teacher's Role in the Classroom

Given that most faculty do not have pedagogical training, the course provided a sojourn into course design that resulted in new knowledge and renewed confidence. Many teachers reported increased commitment, motivation, satisfaction, and hope.

I had a set plan for the term. . . . My first educational experience was complete, and I knew exactly what the goals of this unit was. Therefore, I started the semester confident and organized: I knew where we were going and communicated the information to my students. I

felt in control and competent, and I think that must have influenced their perception of the course. I hope it made them feel like they were in good hands; their guide knew what she was doing. (English)

I now have a clear, clear purpose. In history we tend to lecture, so I was looking for different strategies to compensate for some in-class activities—by redistributing the work outside of class I find and feel that they are learning a lot more. This is what I got—it makes me more motivated as a teacher. (History)

It increased my self-confidence and the idea of new possibilities. New ways in the classroom have given me hope and energy. (Psychology)

Letting Go

The only way students can move towards self-directed learning is if teachers step back after planning the learner's educational journey, allowing the learner to move forward. Many teachers, especially new or mid-career teachers, find this difficult to do.

New teachers have trouble because they go through an interview, get the job and start in two weeks. Bad teaching habits are formed. I feel that I am a much better teacher because it has given me confidence that I can let go. I do not control as much and feel more mature as a teacher. (History)

Feeling Fatigued but Satisfied

All in all, the people who think blended learning will allow them to coast and “take-it-easy” are entirely wrong. I've worked so hard this term! I'm drained. Still, I think blended learning is a good educational framework to work with, and perhaps the key is adapting it

to fit the capabilities of college students, who need, I think, a lot more guidance than adult learners. (English)

I am an experienced teacher, yet I have worked harder this term than any other. There is no denying that the planning takes time, the outcome is exciting, but the planning and implementation takes time. (Biology)

Implications

Any transformative process strong enough to positively affect ways of teaching and learning must be recognized through the creation of institutional policies that legitimate its practice. The strategy for its adoption must be intentional and official. It requires the commitment of the administration and teachers with varied perspectives on what constitutes effective teaching and learning to collaborate (Bager-Elsborg 2018).

Blended learning requires the educator to consider learning as a dynamic process which, through the course's design, integrates student collaboration and accommodates the diversity of student learners in the creation of knowledge. As such, it is essential to build a course that effectively integrates synchronous and asynchronous learning activities, whether these are in-person or online components. The knowledge students build, using this modality, goes beyond the acquisition of competencies and meeting required standards. Students' learning is connected to a complex of relationships with teachers, peers, and the college itself. One of blended learning's strengths is that students develop learning strategies which ultimately are transferable to new learning environments. The development of these intellectual and social processes, best attained through courses aligned within programs, accommodates the students' transitioning from high school to college, from semester to semester, and from college to university.

Blended learning implies a thoughtful integration of face-to-face and online learning, a rethinking of course design, and replacing traditional class contact hours with meaningful, carefully designed

learning experiences that can take place outside of class and optimize student engagement. Teachers who availed themselves of the blended learning training experienced a new understanding about what it meant to design a course and stood in awe at the amount of planning that goes into a well-constructed blended learning course. The time spent in intentional course planning led to feelings of confidence and self-efficacy on the part of the teacher and corresponding feelings of well-being and safety on the part of the students who entered their blended classrooms.

Done well, blended learning offers an instructional role for the teacher that is student-centered, requiring the design of meaningful learning experiences, timely feedback, enhanced teacher-student communication, and an emphasis on self-regulated learning (Garrison and Vaughan 2008). If not done carefully and with rigor, the shift to a totally online or a blended learning environment can negate pedagogical advances made in teaching and learning in higher education during the last thirty years by replicating negative aspects of the status quo and reinforcing the traditional emphasis on lecturing to transmit knowledge from teacher to student, as opposed to creating learning environments that engage students, foster their autonomy, and promote further learning. Blended learning is key to fulfilling the promise of higher education.

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